

Fall 8-15-1998

ENG 4763-001: Advanced Fiction Writing

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SYLLABUS

INSTRUCTOR: John Kilgore. Office: 314K Coleman Hall. Office Hours: MTWTh 10-2, and by appointment. Phone: 581-6313 (office), 345-7395 (home). Please feel free to call my home at reasonable hours. Include date and time of call when leaving voice-mail messages at the office, and **don't trust voice-mail at all if your message is urgent**--try me at home instead.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

Gardner, On Becoming a Novelist

Cassill, ed., The Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction (NF)

LeGuin, ed., The Norton Book of Science Fiction (BSF)

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: regular attendance and class participation; oral report and presentation on author or story of your choice; a brief workbook; and either 3-5 short stories or one novella, about 30-50pp. of polished, mature prose in either case. The final grade will be determined approximately as follows: novella or stories--65%; participation--10%; report, workbook, and intangibles--25%.

DUE DATES. The workbook will be due September 15. There are three basic due dates for stories--9/29, 10/22, and 11/17--and one for an optional rewrite, 12/8. Hand in a finished story on each due date, and a rewrite if you choose on the last due date. If you are working on the novella option, submit portions of your novella in lieu of short stories on the first two dates, skip the third date, and give me the completed manuscript on 12/1; the rewrite option will not be open to you. **If you choose to do three stories with no rewrite, you may use the 12/8 date rather than 11/16 for the final story.** If you are writing short-short stories and want to submit four or five stories instead of three, use the same due dates for both stories and rewrites, but hand in two stories rather than one on one or more due dates.

WORKBOOK. Should be a folder or loose-leaf binder in which pages can be conveniently reshuffled. Keep the entries in chronological order, and type everything. The required work consists of a set of exercises (see below) due September 15. No further workbook writing will be required, but depending on your writing habits and creative chemistry, you might want to keep a journal for the rest of the term, a practice many writers find indispensable.

STORY GRADE (65% of course total). For short story writers, will equal the average of the three short-story grades, with the rewrite grade (if any) replacing the initial grade on a rewritten story. For novella writers, grades on installments will be provisional and advisory; the final grade will be given on the completed manuscript.

All assignments must be typed. Single-space stories for workshop; double-space others and your workbook exercises. Skip an extra space between paragraphs of single-spaced manuscripts (i.e., follow the format you see in front of you). **You will need to provide extra copies of all workshop stories.**

GRADING STANDARDS. Are of course hard to define in a creative writing course, but probably less so than is commonly believed. Your stories will be subject to no a priori requirements as to form, content, or genre, but should be--quite simply--the best work you can do, and will be subjected to vigorous critical analysis by your classmates and by me. We will try to judge each story according to its own implicit aesthetic goals and standards, and I assign grades "holistically," according to my best judgement of a story's overall artistic success. By this I mean success as written; I try my best to read the story that is actually there, not the one that potentially could be. Details matter, readability counts, and I take for granted a basic control of grammar, spelling, and punctuation; if you still have trouble at these levels, this

may not be the course for you.

Other things that make a story good: fresh observation; strong characterization; realism; strong voice; appeal to the senses; mastery of form and technique and genre; emotional appeal; intellectual appeal; truth to life; truth to fantasy; candor; skepticism; creative madness; strangeness. There is no way to put all these things on any kind of quantitative scale, but we all know, mostly, when we have read a good story.

REPORTS. will take place throughout the term, starting in the second week. Each report will deal with a story or other short piece of prose you have assigned to us in advance; you are free either to choose one of the stories already listed in the schedule below, or to use one of your personal favorites. In the latter case you must provide copies. Your job is to lead discussion of the story for about fifteen minutes, focussing on those elements of craft or vision you admire, sharing your enthusiasm, trying ultimately to suggest what writing lesson the story may particularly offer us. You may want to bring in some background information on the author of "your" story, especially if you have read more of his or her work and would like to tell us about it. See me to arrange the date for your presentation. **Note:** Some of the assigned readings in the schedule below may be cancelled, if people are choosing to report on other stories than those already listed.

ATTENDANCE. A writing workshop can be effective only if all members feel responsible to each other, as well as to their own writing; so attendance in class is vital. I will take attendance at each meeting by passing around a sign-up sheet which it is your responsibility to find and sign. The resulting record will count for about 75% of your participation grade, on the following scale: 1-2 absences = A, 3 = B, 4 = C, 5 = D, 6 = F, 7 = -1.0, 8 = -2.0, etc. Note that you have two free absences; then I lower the boom. Use the free absences as insurance to protect you in case of illnesses, car breakdowns, deaths of pets, and other circumstances beyond your control. I will listen sympathetically to excuses, **BUT I WILL NOT AWARD ATTENDANCE CREDIT FOR ANY CLASS YOU HAVE MISSED.** Not automatically, anyway; in cases where absences seem truly unavoidable, I may be willing to give extra assignments for make-up credit. Such assignments are guaranteed to be more difficult and painful than just coming to class would have been.

SCHEDULE. Due to the unpredictable time requirements of workshop discussions, we will need to make frequent adjustments in the schedule. Please bring the syllabus to every class and take note of changes. Try to be alert and conscientious in preparing for class meetings. **In particular, it is crucial that you read your classmates' work, very carefully, in advance of workshop discussions.** Try to plan ahead so that you will be writing--and rewriting--steadily.

Everyone must have at least two stories (or novella sections) in workshop. Story #1 goes into workshop automatically; for the second round, you may choose Story #3 instead of Story #2 if you prefer.

COPIES. Due to budget constraints, you will be responsible for providing copies of your stories for workshop discussion. When you hand in a story that will be discussed in workshop, provide one copy for me, one each for everyone else in the class, plus a couple of extras. When you hand in a story that will not be in workshop, one copy will do. **Be sure to keep at least one copy of anything—even a very rough draft—that you hand to anyone else.**

LATE WORK: I will be fairly flexible if you get in touch with me before the missed deadline and have good reasons for being late. Otherwise late work will be penalized one third grade (e.g., from "B" to "B-") for each day late, weekends included. Do NOT expect me to grant extensions at the end of the term, as it may be impossible for me to read late work in time to file final grades.

NETWORKING. I hope that in this class you will feel very free to ask for one another's advice on drafts before handing in the more-or-less final draft for workshop. I will circulate a list of telephone numbers and e-mail addresses. Don't be shy; decide whose advice you would like and ask for it. If you're asked—even if you're asked repeatedly—feel flattered, not put upon. You will probably be learning more than anyone else.

MAGAZINE: I would like us to try to publish a small literary magazine in this class. Our ability to do so will depend on getting funds from a grant which I have in process, something we won't know about till October. In the meantime, be thinking of the EIU campus as at least one audience you may be addressing. . . . As the time approaches, I will need help compiling and editing the magazine. Stay tuned for further information, and be thinking of what you would like your contribution to look like. Contributing to the magazine will not be compulsory, nor will it much affect your grade in the course; but it will make you feel better about yourself. Scout's honor.

SCHEDULE

NOTE: Please have all readings completed before the indicated class sessions, but don't read too far ahead. After week 3 the reports will be taking precedence, so many assigned readings are apt to be changed or cancelled on fairly short notice. Keep close track of announced changes.

1) August 25, 27

Course Introduction

BEGIN WORKBOOK

Adams, "Barcelona," NF1. Minot, "Lust," NF381.

2) September 1, 3

Gardner, On Becoming a Novelist, Chapter 1.

Dubus, "A Father's Story," NF162.

Reports:

3) September 8, 10

BEGIN FIRST STORY ASAP

Readings from workbooks.

Wolff, "In the Garden of the North American Martyrs," NF535. Gardner, "Redemption" (handout).

Reports:

4) September 15, 17

WORKBOOK DUE ON MONDAY

Phillips, "Souvenir," NF452; Ford, "Rock Springs," NF199.

Discussion of samples from workbooks.

Reports:

5) September 22, 24

Leguin, "The New Atlantis, BSF317 or NF326; Shiner, "The War at Home," BSF577. Sterling, "We See Things Differently," BSF762.

Early workshop?

Reports:

6) September 29, October 1

FIRST STORY DUE ON MONDAY – MULTIPLE COPIES

Costello, "Murphy's Xmas," NF148.

Workshop.

Reports:

7) October 6, 8

Workshop.

Reports:

8) October 13, 15

Workshop.

Erdrich, "Saint Marie," NF186.

Reports:
Workshop.

9) October 20, 22

Jones, "The Black Lights," NF305. Mason, "Love Life," NF381.
Workshop.

Reports:

SECOND STORY DUE WEDNESDAY – MULTIPLE COPIES IF YOU ELECT TO HAVE THIS STORY IN WORKSHOP

10) October 27, 29

Updike, "The Other," NF493.

Workshop.

Reports:

11) November 3, 5

Barthelme, "The Indian Uprising," NF34. "The Babysitter," NF78.

Workshop.

Reports:

12) November 10, 12

Visitor, reading, or in-class writing TBA.

Workshop.

13) November 17, 19

ON MONDAY: THIRD STORY DUE – MULTIPLE COPIES FOR THOSE WHO ELECT TO HAVE THIS STORY IN WORKSHOP

Readings from journals or workbooks.

Kessel, "Invaders," BSF830.

Reports:

****THANKSGIVING BREAK, NOVEMBER 23-27****

14) December 1, 3

Workshop.

NOVELLAS DUE ON WEDNESDAY

15) December 8, 10

REWRITES DUE ON MONDAY

Workshop.

Group reading.

WORKBOOK REQUIREMENTS

DO 1 AND 2; PLUS ANY FOUR OF THE OTHERS. NUMBER AND TITLE EACH EXERCISE. HAND IN SEPTEMBER 15.

1) [Required.] Keep a running journal for the dates August 25-29. Write at least 100 and no more than 200 words each day. Avoid diary-type entries unless you can make them genuinely compelling. Try instead to collect beginnings and fragments of stories.

PURPOSE: to build the writing habit; to train the mind to collect material.

2) [Required.] Write a story of at least two and no more than three pages, using the title handed to you in the second class meeting. Make the story contain all the following elements: Minor scene, interim, background and characterization, major scene, resolution, dialogue, description, exposition, a well-defined and well-sustained point of view.

PURPOSE: to develop command of structure and the variability of style that ensures you will possess the right prose tool for the right task.

3) In the first person, write a reminiscence of a time, a place, or an action that comes from at least five years back in your past. Make the reader aware of the lapse in time that separates the narrator speaking "now" and his other self back in the past. Feel free to fictionalize and invent.

PURPOSE: To heighten awareness and control of point of view; to practice turning the self into a character; with luck, to make contact with some material that will become a story.

4) Rewrite the beginning of Alice Adams's "Barcelona," NF1, telling the same event from the points of view of two other characters—perhaps Thad and then the thief. Give both thoughts and perceptions. **STICK TO THIRD PERSON, NOT FIRST.**

PURPOSE: To practice control and awareness of third-person, limited omniscient point of view.

5) Sketch from direct observation two people you do not know, concentrating on physical details, about 150 words each. Then invent a plausible personal background for one of the two, fantasizing as freely as you like.

PURPOSE: To heighten powers of direct observation and skill in description; to practice seeing the connection between physical appearance and underlying personality.

6) With a tape recorder or, preferably, a small child as your audience, tell from beginning to end a story you invent as you go along. Then write an entertaining, readable 3-500 word version of the story.

PURPOSE: To stimulate imagination; to teach the value of getting on with it—of not agonizing over details till you're ready.

7) Sit down without any clear intentions. Close your eyes for a moment and concentrate on what you see. Then open your eyes and write down exactly that. Let the piece develop into a sketch of 3-500 words.

PURPOSE: To develop the habit of "painting what you see."

8) Visualize a moment of intense grief, shame, or emotional hurt from your past. Then sketch the moment as fully and thoroughly as possible without ever once making direct reference to any emotion, or relying on obvious physical cues (tears trickling down cheeks, long sighs, etc.) to evoke emotion. Concentrate instead on capturing the physical milieu, bringing in background as relevant. Continue the sketch for about 500 words, letting it begin to turn into a story if it seems to want to.

PURPOSE: To appropriate the energy of strong emotion without being swamped by it; to teach the importance of objectivity, distance, and restraint; to practice selection and use of expressive detail.

9) Write a long monologue by a speaker who is in some sense sharply differentiated from yourself. (She may have the same build, clothes, fingerprints, and birthday; but we should feel her as someone different from the author.) Do everything you can to make the monologue FEEL as real as a transcribed tape-recording; but keep it from being boring. Let your speaker tell a story if she seems inclined to do so.

PURPOSE: To develop control and appreciation of voice in fiction.

10) Write a dialogue of about three pages. Then rewrite the dialogue at the length of about half a page, using the narrative voice to fill in any content that is lost from the original. (Hand in both versions.)

PURPOSE: To teach the need for compression and cutting in dialogue.

11) Write something about 3-500 words long in which you deliberately try to shock the audience. **OR:** Either confess to, or narrate, the commission of some shameful act.

PURPOSE: To build courage, or anyway that peculiar variety of it that writers need.

12) Write a sketch of about 300 words depicting something you know well: a technique for scaling bass, strange speech habits in your own town, the best way of pissing off your mother-in-law—anything about which you are more or less an expert.

PURPOSE: to learn the effectiveness and importance of "insider's knowledge."

13) Write a 3-4 paragraph summary of an event or action in strict chronological order, using phrases like "and then" and "a little later," "next," etc. Then go back and rewrite the sketch, doing everything you can to subvert chronology. Take tangents, omit events, above all find other ways to organize the material than temporal relations. If you do this right, the second version should be three times more interesting than the first.

PURPOSE: To learn the terrible dullness and insidious tyranny of blow-by-blow organization; to develop non-chronological means of organization and presentation.

14) In about a page, describe a sunset, a beach, a rainstorm, fall, Christmas, or your mother. Then rewrite the description at one third the length.

PURPOSE: To discover that everything you learned about "description" in high school is wrong; to learn to avoid "on the nose" writing, trusting the reader's imagination where appropriate.